



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE  
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

**Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman  
“Russia’s Occupation of Georgia and the Erosion of the International Order”  
July 17, 2018**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ten years ago—as a consequence of Russia’s invasion of Georgia—two of my constituents were trapped behind Russian lines in South Ossetia. The girls – Ashley and Sophia – were seven and three years old. Russia’s land grab transformed the girls’ summer trip to visit their grandparents into a family nightmare.

I arrived in Tbilisi on August 19, 11 days after the invasion, and worked with US Ambassador John Tefft – one of our finest ambassadors – with French Ambassador Eric Fournier, the Red Cross, and others to secure the girls’ safe evacuation. Ashley and Sophia were soon reunited with their parents in Howell, New Jersey. Then we worked with the Red Cross in Georgia to secure the relocation and evacuation of several other American children from areas occupied by Russia.

Even after returning to the US, the work to bring children out of the war zone and reunite them with their families here in the States continued.

Mariam Tsapatsaris, the 5 year-old daughter of New Jersey residents Anna and Nick, was with her grandmother in Poti when the Russians invaded. She was forced to lie on the floor with her grandmother as Russian tanks rumbled in the streets. Eventually Mariam too came to the US, but the delay was tormenting for her family.

As the first Member of Congress to arrive in Georgia after the invasion, I also met with President Saakashvili and Prime Minister Gurgendidze, and with Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II, and of course with many Georgians of all walks of life, including at an IDP camp. **Despite Putin’s aggression the people of Georgia showed great courage and resolve and competence during a national emergency – Russian tanks were only an hour from Tbilisi.** They were patriotic – the Georgians I met on that trip never expressed hatred for Russia – they were motivated by love of their own country.

Two years ago I was back in Tbilisi for the annual meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and, together with some of my congressional colleagues, visited the fence Russia has created between the territories it occupies and the rest of Georgia. It is an ugly scar on the land, and, looking over the fence from an observation platform, we saw soldiers drilling and making threatening gestures. Their bearing, the wall, the entire atmosphere reminded us of looking into East Berlin.

I look forward to learning from our witnesses what in the short term might be done to build down the division and mitigate the humanitarian suffering caused by this new Iron Curtain Russia has installed to divide Georgia – perhaps the dialogue between Presidents Trump and Putin can be used in this direction?

In any case progress can only be built on the truth, and so I hope we continue to call it like it was – the Russian war against Georgia was unjust, its conduct of its occupation has been brutal and caused unnecessary suffering, and its attempt to alienate Georgian territory is illegal and can never be recognized.